

VZCZCXRO5879
PP RUEHDBU
DE RUEHTA #0694/01 0530717
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
P 220717Z FEB 06 ZDS
FM AMEMBASSY ALMATY
TO RUCNCIS/CIS COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 4227
INFO RUEHVEN/USMISSION USOSCE 1508

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 ALMATY 000694

SIPDIS

C O R R E C T E D C O P Y (ADDRESS)

SIPDIS

SCA/CEN (JMUDGE), DRL/PHD (CKUCHTA/HELBLING)

E.O. 12958: DECL: 02/21/2016

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [KDEM](#) [PHUM](#) [KZ](#)

SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR'S FIRST MEETING WITH OPPOSITION LEADER
GALYMZHAN ZHAKIYANOV, FEB. 17, 2007

REF: A. ALMATY 326

[1](#)B. ALMATY 646

[1](#)C. ALMATY 651

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Classified By: DCM Mark Asquino; Reasons 1.4 (b) (d)

[1](#)1. (SBU) Summary: On February 17, the Ambassador and DCM met with Galymzhan Zhakiyanov, founder of the Democratic Choice for Kazakhstan political opposition movement. Zhakiyanov, who was recently released on parole after serving 3 1/2 years in prison (ref A), had not previously met with the Ambassador. During the 90 minute meeting, Zhakiyanov and the Ambassador discussed the official investigation into the murder of opposition leader Altynbek Sarsenbaiuly, the impact of his death on the opposition, and the future of opposition politics in Kazakhstan. End Summary

Sarsenbaiuly's Murder: Personal Loss and Political Impact

[1](#)2. (C) Mr. Zhakiyanov began by thanking the Ambassador for the Embassy's support following the murder of opposition leader Altynbek Sarsenbaiuly (Refs B, C.) He noted the Ambassador's attendance at Sarsenbaiuly's February 15 memorial service and the Embassy's February 14 press statement calling for a full investigation of the crime. In conveying appreciation, Zhakiyanov said that he was speaking both for himself and the senior leadership of the opposition "For A Just Kazakhstan" movement, including Zharmakhan Tuyekbuy, Oraz Zhandosov, and Bulat Abilov. Zhakiyanov said he also wanted to thank the Ambassador for the Embassy's support during his 3 1/2 years of imprisonment.

[1](#)3. (C) Zhakiyanov said the most important thing was to find those responsible for the murders of Mr. Sarsenbaiuly, his bodyguard and driver. Although he was inclined to suspect government involvement in the crime, he agreed with the Ambassador that this remained an open question. He said that Sarsenbaiuly's death was a personal as well as professional loss for him. They had known each other since their university days in Moscow. They had both entered government about the same time, rose together to important, official positions, with Zhakiyanov becoming governor of Pavlodar and Sarsenbaiuly being named Chairman of the National Security Council. They had been members of President Nazarbayev's inner circle. However, both had become disillusioned with the President, and left government to found opposition political parties. Zhakiyanov said that Sarsenbaiuly had told him shortly before he was killed that with presidential

elections now over, the opposition needed to work together to build a strong civil society. Zhakiyanov added that he truly believed in the importance of the opposition coming together for the good of society. However, he agreed with the Ambassador that, following Sarsenbaiuly's murder, it would be far more difficult for the opposition to engage in a dialogue with the government on political reform through the GOK's Commission for Democracy.

Zhakiyanov Questions Nazarbayev's Commitment to Democracy

14. (C) Zhakiyanov then voiced his doubts about President Nazarbayev's commitment to political reform and democracy. He said that he had tried hard before he left government to persuade President Nazarbayev to pursue a democratic political agenda. While Nazarbayev paid lip service to democratic values, he always saw concrete political reform as something for the "future." For example, Zhakiyanov said that Nazarbayev resisted the idea of allowing for regional akims (governors) to be popularly elected rather than appointed, because this would be destabilizing. Nazarbayev saw this as a particular danger in the majority ethnic-Russian communities near Russia's borders, which conceivably might pursue separatist aspirations. The Ambassador noted that such concerns should be addressed through the democratic political process. Zhakiyanov said that Nazarbayev's past as a Soviet-era First Secretary led him to fear and distrust democracy as a threat to his retention of power. For this reason, while Nazarbayev might say the right things about pursuing democracy, Zhakiyanov doubted he would ever permit such reforms to take place as long as he was president.

15. (C) Zhakiyanov said that before he parted political ways with the president, the two men's wives had tried to broker a reconciliation between them. All four had met at the president's home in Astana in a gathering that was cordial, but one that failed to change Zhakiyanov's mind about leaving government to found the opposition DCK party. Even though Sarsenbaiuly remained in government for a time, Zhakiyanov

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said he had been an intellectual supporter of the DCK. However, he too eventually concluded President Nazarbayev was not willing to pursue democracy. Sarsenbaiuly stepped down from his post as Ambassador to Russia in 2003. However, rather than joining Zhakiyanov DCK, he became a co-chairman of the opposition Ak Zhol party. Zhakiyanov said Nazarbayev viewed all those who left his inner circle as direct threats to his government, and treated them accordingly,

16. (C) Zhakiyanov told the Ambassador he had been disappointed by the divisions that had developed in the opposition. In his view, these disagreements had led to Ak Zhol splitting into two wings and the failure of the opposition to reunite behind one presidential candidate in the past election. The Ambassador said that while the divisions had hurt the opposition, they were not a deciding factor in Nazarbayev's overwhelming election victory. Zhakiyanov agreed, adding that that despite the fact he questioned the president's 91% official ballot return, it was clear that he had been re-elected by a large margin.

The Sarsenbaiuly Investigation and Beyond

7.(C) Discussion then returned to the Sarsenbaiuly murder investigation. Zhakiyanov said that Ak Zhol co-chairman Oraz Zhandosov and others in the opposition had questioned why the U.S. was providing support to the investigation. The Ambassador noted that the U.S. wanted to work jointly with the GOK to find those responsible for the crime. The FBI had certain technical expertise to offer, and U.S. participation would add transparency to the GOK's efforts. The Ambassador said from a political perspective it was

crucial to determine why the crime had been committed and who profited from it. Zhakiyanov said that the opposition planned to monitor the investigation through a citizens' commission, headed by For a Just Kazakhstan head Tuyekbuy. He pointed out that Tuyekbuy was a former Procurator General and that other members of the commission had a background in law enforcement. Zhakiyanov asked what the Ambassador thought about having a distinguished foreign expert --perhaps a retired prosecutor or law enforcement official --join the citizens' commission. The Ambassador replied that participation by such a foreigner might indeed serve to de-politicize such a citizens' commission. However, great care would be needed in choosing such a foreign expert. Zhakiyanov said that what Kazakhstan needed was a professional investigation that would lead to the punishment of those who committed the crime. This should be followed by the building of a strong civil society. Both required leadership by the president. He added that although Nazarbayev had sent presidential advisor Murat Tazin and Almaty City Akim Tazmagambetov to represent him at Sarsenbaiuly's memorial service, the opposition continued to believe that the government had had some role in the murder.

18. (C) The Ambassador said that President Nazarbayev had publicly committed himself to future democratic reforms. Now it was time for the president to take action. The Ambassador thought the first democratic reform might be popular election of regional akims. The second step would be a stronger parliament, which included opposition members. Finally, there should be a better balance of power among the branches of government. Zhakiyanov thought all three were important. However, he continued to question Nazarbayev's commitment to democracy and how Nazarbayev viewed such reforms in terms of his legacy. The Ambassador noted that Nazarbayev's concern with his legacy might lead him to pursue political reform. The U.S. certainly was encouraging the president to do so through gradual steps in this direction. Zhakiyanov said his greatest fear was that Kazakhstan would become another Venezuela --an oil rich nation dominated by an authoritarian president.

19. (C) In Zhakiyanov's view Russia, more than China, would continue to have strong influence over Kazakhstan's political climate. The Ambassador replied that a stable, democratic Kazakhstan was in the long-term interests of both China and Russia. Zhakiyanov said he had his doubts about this. He noted that both countries had supported Uzbekistan after the Andijon killings despite Karimov's increasingly unstable government and its destabilizing effect on the entire region. China, in particular, feared that Kazakhstan could become a democratic model that would undermine Chinese authority among its own people. For this reason, as long as it could pursue its own economic interests, China would do little to support Kazakhstan's political stability. The Ambassador said that in the long run, both China and Russia needed to realize how short sighted their support for Karimov was and that it undermined their own security and economic interests in

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Central Asia.

The Way Forward for the Opposition: Avoid Radicalism and Isolation

10. (C) Zhakiyanov said that he had urged his fellow opposition members not to become embittered and radicalized by Sarsenbaiuly's murder. It was important for the opposition to build bridges to the government and not become isolated. He added that even during the years of his imprisonment, he had maintained informal ties with high level government officials, including Chairman of the National Security Council Utemuratov and Senate Chairman Abykayev. His wife had been able to turn to both men to express concerns about Zhakiyanov's health and well-being. The Ambassador said that despite obvious difficulties at the

present time, the best way forward for the opposition was to engage with the government through eventual participation in democracy commission discussions. He added that the Embassy would continue to urge the government to deal in a fair way with registering opposition political party True Ak Zhol. In his discussions with Presidential Chief of Staff Zhaksabekov and Minister of Justice Balieya, both had said they were not opposed to the party's registration. The U.S. would also continue to support a dialogue between the GOK and the opposition. For his part, Zhakiyanov said he saw himself in a mediating role to bring the two sides together. The meeting concluded with his thanking the Ambassador and Embassy once again for their help.

¶11. (C) Comment: Zhakiyanov was focussed and pragmatic throughout the discussion, particularly on the subject of opposition politics and his own, future political role. Nevertheless, it was clear from the meeting that Sarsenbaiuly's murder has been a major blow to the opposition. His death has made post-election dialogue between the opposition and the GOK far more difficult for the immediate future. End Comment.
ASQUINO